

Corporate Governance Enhancement Activity carried out in 2021/22

Corporate governance activity included in the peach text boxes below are deemed significant. Activity is deemed significant if recommended for inclusion in the Annual Governance Statement by the Shared Internal Audit Service following their review of control arrangements to meet the Audit Plan or identified as key to the management of 'very high/high' level strategic risks. To provide a complete picture of governance enhancement carried out in 2021/22, activity pertaining to best practice has also been reflected below.

Principle A: Behaving with integrity, demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values and respecting the rule of law

- The Officer Code of Conduct has been reviewed and approved by Council.
- The tenure of the current Independent Member of Audit Committee was extended for a further year (from July 2022 to July 2023)
- The Council's Anti-Fraud and Corruption Strategy and Anti-Money Laundering Policy were reviewed and approved by Audit Committee and a new SBC Fraud Sanctions Policy was produced.
- The Council's Procurement Strategy was reviewed to create greater emphasis on community wealth building and, where possible, the local sourcing of goods and services. A new Co-Operative Procurement Strategy 2021-2024 was produced and approved by Executive.

Principle B: Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement

- The Annual Report and Performance Overview highlighting the Council's achievements over the past year and plans for the next twelve months was approved by Executive and published on the Council's website
- A Resident Survey has been carried out to survey how residents perceive Council services and their local area. The information gathered from residents will help to provide insight on their priorities for the town, the extent to which the Council is perceived to provide value for money and how well services are meeting residents' expectations.
- Consultation was carried out on the 'issues and options' stage of the development of an Area Action Plan for the Station Gateway regeneration project. An Area Action Plan (AAP) is a type of Development Plan Document, providing a planning framework for a specific area of opportunity, change or conservation. AAPs can create new policy over and above the Local Plan within the designated AAP area.
- A Climate Change Citizens Panel took place from 26th October to 29th October 2021. The panel consisted of 24 participants broadly representative of the town. The participants heard from five local experts on the science, policy and activism surrounding the climate emergency and then deliberated on what action they would like to see to help Stevenage reach its target of net zero by 2030.

Principle C: Defining outcomes in terms of sustainable economic and environmental benefits

General Fund Asset Management Strategy: The Locality Review Structure is now well established. All three tranches of land identified for disposal have now been agreed by Executive. The current Asset Management system is being reviewed to see if it can meet the needs of the service.

Making Your Money Count (MYMC): To ensure that the Council has sufficient financial resources to fund its medium and long term service plans and corporate priorities the following activity has been carried out: The Making Your Money County General Fund savings target for 2022/23 was achieved and savings included in the 2022/23 General Fund budget including a review of fees and charges. In addition a report to the June 2022 Executive will outline further options totalling £500K to increase the Council's financial resilience. The Capital Programme has been reviewed and adjusted for revised estimates of capital receipts and costs of capital schemes. The Housing Revenue Account Business Plan is being refreshed and is scheduled for consideration by Executive in summer 2022. The Transformation and commercialisation programmes which will help meet the MYMC savings target will allow the Council to deliver its strategic priorities, protect outcomes for residents, and provide excellent customer experience whilst also meeting the Council's financial security targets are progressing

- The Council's Future Town, Future Council programme was reviewed. The programme has now been streamlined and has five sections: Transforming our Town, More Social and Affordable Homes, Co-operative Neighbourhoods, Making your Money Count and a Clean, Green, Safe and Thriving Town

Principle D: Determining the interventions necessary to optimise the achievement of the intended outcomes

Regeneration: To ensure good governance of the Regeneration programme the following action has been carried out: A capital funding plan covering key regeneration projects is being developed by the Strategic Director (Finance) with support from Finance, Estates and Regeneration. This will identify and progress funding sources to ensure suitable capital funding is in place to deliver the projects, including the identification of land disposals and the ring-fencing of receipts.

The Housing Development and Regeneration Executive Committee continues to receive updates on key projects.

Stevenage was successfully awarded £37.5m of funding through the Government's Towns Fund programme. In order to secure this funding, full business cases must be developed for each of the nine projects that comprise the Stevenage Towns Fund programme. Executive have approved a number of these business cases.

Stevenage Development Board continues to have a vital role through the development of business cases with partners engaged in working groups to support the development and finalisation of the business cases. The Board includes a wide range of key stakeholders, who will need to endorse the business cases and play a key role in engaging with the projects across a range of themes, including Culture, Skills, Sustainable Transport and Town Centre Regeneration. This will ensure experience and expertise across a range of sectors will be harnessed to support the development of robust and deliverable business cases, for projects that will have a significant positive impact for the town.

To support the assurance process, and ensure appropriate separation of interests when the Council is acting as Accountable Body, an Officer Panel consisting of senior Stevenage Borough Council and partner officers (a Director, Section 151 Officer, Monitoring Officer, Hertfordshire LEP and HCC officers) has been established to ensure business cases meet requirements before being recommended to the Development Board for approval.

FTFC milestones have been adjusted following COVID-19, although the majority of progress remains unaffected.

Regular Steering Group meetings are held with key members of the Mace and SBC teams, with two weekly operational meetings between the project teams.

Commercialism: To ensure that the Council's ambitious commercial agenda can be achieved the following action has been carried out: The Commercial and Investment Executive Working Group continues to meet on a quarterly basis. Its purpose is to advise and make recommendations to the Executive on the development of co-operative commercial and insourcing programmes of work. A new advertising and sponsorship scheme has been launched. This new initiative will provide an advertising boost for local businesses following the lockdown and aims to generate income for the Council. The scheme brings together a Council-owned sponsorship portfolio which includes roundabouts, car parks, council owned buildings, events and parks. The formalisation of a filming offer for Stevenage is underway, linked to the Council's Cultural Strategy and aimed at bringing additional revenue into the Council and the wider borough. The new Corporate Commercial Officer has started in role and is involved in promoting the commercial agenda through researching income generation opportunities, improving processes, increasing efficiencies and pursuing insourcing opportunities. A fully costed proposal for solar panels for the Multi- Storey car park at the railway station has been presented for consideration with a view to offsetting substation costs. A commercial approach has been applied to 2022/23 fees and charges, including a new bulky waste charging proposal, moving closer to cost recovery in some service areas and all concessionary rates have had an initial review, with some changes made through 2022/23 fees and charges. In the garages service, the move to 52 week charging is complete, lock changes are now carried out at full cost recovery and Voluntary and Community Organisation garage tenants have been moved to low demand areas.

COVID-19: In response to the COVID-19 crisis and ensure the Council can continue to deliver services, continue to meet its FTFC ambitions and enable recovery from the effect of the virus the following action has been carried out: The Council has Covid-19 incident management arrangements in place, working with partners to address the ongoing impacts of the pandemic. Executive Members have received monthly epidemiology and COVID-19 briefings. A Hertfordshire outbreak management cell continues to meet to consider all current epidemiological data and COVID developments in Stevenage and across the county in order to ensure response plans are current and targeted action is taken aligned to the countywide Hertfordshire COVID-19 Outbreak Plan and in cooperation with partner agencies. Ongoing work continues to review the Council's financial position via regular monitoring and quarterly review. Business Continuity meetings have been held as required to consider arrangements for business continuity of council services, partnership support for health activities such as vaccination programmes and environmental health advice, communications and working with local communities. Several service areas continue to experience significantly heightened demand or pressure, arising from the pandemic, from homelessness to void properties, and other community services, with plans in place to increase capacity for some key service areas.

Socio-Economic Impacts: As a result of the combined socio-economic impacts of welfare reform, the COVID-19 pandemic, and an economic downturn the following actions have been carried out: The Community Renewal Fund bid 'Community Wealth Building Together' which was submitted in collaboration with colleagues from other Districts and Boroughs was approved for delivery by DLUHC and the Hertfordshire LEP on 3rd November 2021. Initial activities have begun and a dedicated programme manager to support these activities has started in post. The primary deliverables are a delegated grant scheme which will look to support 50 organisations (20 micro-businesses and 30 VCSE organisations) with a funding pot of £500,000 split equally throughout Hertfordshire. In addition to this the Council will be looking to create two working groups on Planning and Procurement to look at these topics in relation to all district and borough councils throughout Hertfordshire, alongside the county council. Common themes will be identified and lessons learned in these areas and how agencies can work to better align the current approaches highlighting the feasibility of a common approach to Community Wealth Building and Social Value more broadly.

COVID-19 Recovery remains a key theme for Stevenage Together meetings. Discussions recently have included a presentation by Hertfordshire's Director Of Public Health of what to expect regarding COVID-19 over the winter months, mental health presentation which included the impact of the pandemic and the refresh of the Healthy Stevenage Strategy.

The Construction Industry Training Board initiative has been implemented and the Stevenage Works Funding agreement has been agreed.

Monthly review meetings in relation to the Arrears Action Plan are continuing. A review of the Arrears Action Plan is currently being carried out.

Leisure Contract: The Council is continuing to work with its leisure contractor to ensure recovery of leisure services after the pandemic. Meetings between SBC Officers and SLL are taking place monthly. The Council's Executive, at its meeting on 9th June 2021, considered a report regarding a proposed work programme to enable the Council to determine the strategic delivery of its leisure and cultural offer post March 2023 when the current leisure contract ends.

Council Housing Building and Acquisition: To ensure the Council can deliver new council owned homes as programmed, the following actions have been carried out: All schemes have continued throughout the pandemic with minimal delays. Arrangements have been made to improve cash-flow which has enabled work to continue as planned. Two potential new schemes have been identified and are in the early stage of assessment and initial viability assessments are being carried out. Ongoing governance and review by the Housing Development and Regeneration Working Group continues. A review of the pipeline of future schemes for development will be carried out later this year once the HRA Business Plan has been revised.

- Transformation Programme aimed at improving customer satisfaction, increasing workforce productivity, and delivering savings to sustain services was approved and has commenced.
- The Community Safety Strategy 2021-2024 was approved by Council in July 2021. The new Strategy outlines the emerging priorities of the SoSafe partnership for the next three years.

Principle E: Developing the entity's capacity, including the capability of its leadership and the individuals within it

- Contract Management training was delivered through the EELGA and both events were well attended by Contract Managers.
- Inclusion and Diversity Survey carried out by Council staff.
- Updated Freedom of Information e-learning was delivered and completed by Council staff.

Principle F: Managing risks and performance through robust internal control and strong public financial management

Cyber Security and IT Resilience: To ensure the Council has resilient IT arrangements the following action has been taken: Old firewalls have been deleted and the new ACI, which has recently been installed as part of the network upgrade, is providing additional security. The Virtual Desktop Infrastructure (VDI) upgrade is now complete and the roll out of new VDI has commenced. This will improve the user experience and is an enabler for Microsoft 365 and Windows 10. The design work for the upgrade of the ICT network, to increase IT resilience, is also complete and configuration and testing of the upgraded network is currently underway.

The installation of the microwave link between the Council's two data centres to almost eliminate chances of link breakage and therefore ICT interruption is now complete. As services migrate across to the new network, they will automatically benefit from the additional resilience provided by the microwave link. Microsoft 365, which will support new ways of working, team collaboration and video-conferencing, has been piloted by ICT to troubleshoot any issues prior to its full roll out which commenced in January 2022 and is scheduled to be completed in April 2022. Work is also continuing to upgrade the Council's servers. Email and web filtering has also been replaced to increase ICT security. Meta-compliance which is a new platform that incorporates requirements of e-learning, policy compliance, cyber security and phishing awareness has been installed and will be rolled out soon. A six month cyber security awareness campaign for staff has been produced and will be rolled out from February 2022.

SOCITM have carried out a quality assurance review of the ICT Strategic Programme and Operation and will be reporting back on their findings soon.

Corporate Health and Safety: To ensure the Council has adequate Corporate Health and Safety arrangements the following action has been taken: All high risks are reviewed by the Strategic Health and Safety Group and reported to Corporate Risk Group and the Senior Leadership Team quarterly. The monitor is also reviewed by the Chief Executive at monthly HR meetings.

The Health and Safety team have assisted to ensure that all Council buildings are COVID-19 Secure. New working arrangements for Daneshill House and Cavendish Road have been implemented to ensure the health and safety of staff. The team have also provided support and advice to frontline staff to ensure their safety and the safety of customers. PPE requirements for specific operational settings have been identified and procured. Staff communication messages have been provided to advise staff of COVID-19 guidance. The usual scheduled health and safety training and audits which had been affected by the response to the pandemic resumed in April 2021 and are now on track.

In response to an audit recommendation arising from the Landlord Health and Safety audit, legionella risk assessments have been completed and a programme of remedial works has been agreed with them. The programme of work to complete the remedial works will commence in February 2022 with all remedial works scheduled to be complete by April 2022.

Compliance of the Council's Non-Housing Property: To ensure compliance of the Council's non-housing property, the following action has been taken: The service has developed a clear pathway for the procurement of new compliance contracts and the procurement of facilities management software in 2022. These actions are key to modernising the service and improving efficiency in respect of planning, delivery and follow-up compliance work. The Facilities Helpdesk has improved capacity to administer the remedial log. A dedicated officer is now responsible for ensuring the appropriate remedial work is commissioned and completed on a consistent basis. The compliance audit of all general fund assets is now complete and actions identified have been carried out. Tasks better suited to a larger project are now carried out by the Architect's Team. A strategic plan for implementation of the Corporate Landlord function has been produced and approved and is currently being implemented. An Assets and Capital Board has now been set up. A Stevenage Borough Council Compliance Group has also been recently set up to oversee the Council's approach to compliance and will report to Corporate Risk Group each quarter.

Payment Cards Industry Data Security Standards: To enhance compliance with Payment Cards Industry Data Security Standards the following action has been carried out: The Customer Service Centre has changed its process so payments are only taken via an advisor (rather than via automatic line) if it is the only way customers can pay. Optimisation of the current ICON system is being considered to ensure its full capability is being used and any additional systems /functionality which might be needed to supplement it.

- A new Freedom Of Information system was launched to enhance and management and processing of Freedom of Information requests

Principle G: Implementing good practices in transparency, reporting and audit to deliver effective accountability

- Council approved that SBC will opt in to the appointing arrangements made by Public Sector Audit Appointments for the appointment of External Auditors covering the period April 2023 to March 2028.